

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

NATO's FUTURE ROLE IN THE ARCTIC

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF OPERATIONAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

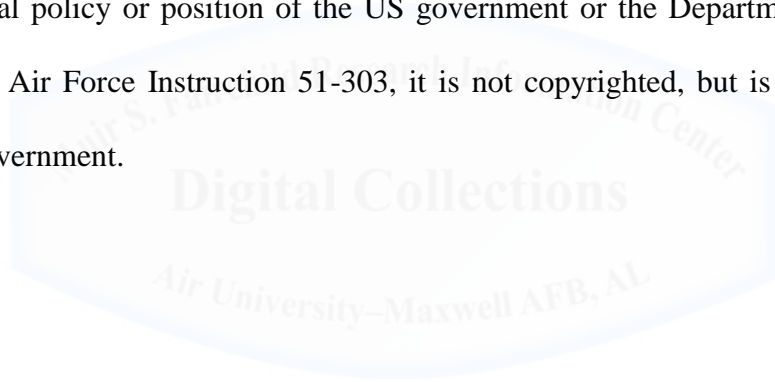
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May 2016

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Abstract

The strategic significance of the Arctic region has been given little attention since the end of the Cold War. However, as global warming continues to impact the polar environment, geopolitical issues such as territorial claims, access to waterways, and resource competition potentially threaten the security and stability in the Arctic. Although Arctic nations (Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the Kingdom of Denmark, via its territory Greenland) have thus far been able to peacefully address concerns, the dynamic environment is susceptible to volatility as emerging issues gain momentum and foreign states expand their interest in Arctic affairs. Under the current status quo, Arctic Council states are able to resolve disputes peacefully. However, as Russia continues to escalate their military presence, further regional security concerns will arise. Arctic states must deter aggression and protect their interest through détente and defense strategies, and utilize diplomatic approaches backed with military strength to ensure enduring security. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must pursue a more active role in the affairs of the Arctic region in order to ensure the sovereignty of NATO nations, preserve regional security, and promote multilateral cooperation through peaceful means.

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Global Climate Change and Arctic Geopolitics

Global climate change has a profound influence on geopolitics.¹ This influence is evident with regard to the issues facing the landmasses and waterways north of N66.34 degrees latitude, which comprises the Arctic region within the Arctic Circle.² The strategic significance of the Arctic region, also referred to as the High North, has been given little attention since the end of the Cold War. However, as global warming continues to impact the polar environment, geopolitical issues such as territorial claims, access to waterways, and resource competition spurring controversy surrounding territorial sovereignty will potentially threaten the security and stability in the Arctic. The region offers increased accessibility to resources such as oil, gas, mining, and fishing, increasing its value and perpetuating economic competition. Although Arctic nations have thus far been able to peacefully address concerns regarding the region, the dynamic environment is susceptible to volatility as emerging issues gain momentum and foreign states expand their interest in Arctic affairs. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must pursue a more active role in the affairs of the Arctic region in order to ensure the sovereignty of NATO nations, preserve Arctic security, and promote multilateral cooperation through peaceful means. This paper provides background explaining the effect of climate change in the Arctic and the consequences on regional security. Issues regarding territorial sovereignty will be addressed followed by the impact of military build-up in the region. It will address why the status quo is not maintainable, despite success to date, given the dynamic climate change effects on geopolitics. Finally, it will present an argument for the criticality of NATO to develop a comprehensive Arctic strategy and for its increased involvement in the region.

Climate change has had a profound effect in the Arctic region. This reality presents a unique set of challenges impacting the eight Arctic nations: Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the Kingdom of Denmark (via its territory Greenland). These countries make up the members states of the Arctic Council, established in 1996 in order to promote “cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states, Arctic Indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants...on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic.”³

The melting of polar ice, causing the rise of sea levels and the erosion of coastline, has introduced new opportunities while triggering discord among the Arctic states.⁴ As this phenomenon has advanced it has increased navigability and accessibility to the maritime environment, opening new trade routes and removing former chokepoints.⁵ This increases the possibility of new economic prospects in fisheries, hydrocarbons, and minerals of strategic geopolitical value. Opportunity for such immense gains combined with the continuing change to the physical environment create a situation which could fuel potential instability as Arctic states seek to quell disputes regarding “overlapping territorial claims” and infringements on sovereignty.⁶ One such example of this is the highly contested ownership of the Barents Sea, an area “about half the size of Germany.” Both Norway and Russia claimed ownership of the area.⁷ After nearly 40 years of dispute, the two countries were finally able to reach an agreement in 2010 without escalation, equally dividing the area, and demonstrating the ability for Arctic states to reach agreements through purely diplomatic means.⁸ This agreement facilitates the access of Norway and Russia to equal shares of the 67,567 square miles of ocean fisheries and petroleum reserves and will bolster the economies of both nations.⁹ Although this bilateral dispute was able to be resolved diplomatically, there are several other claims involving multiple states which are

of further concern. As climate change makes the ability to extract resources from the Arctic more viable, territorial claims have the potential to intensify.

A 2008 report by the United States Geological Survey estimates that 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of the world's undiscovered gas can be found in the Arctic in addition to mineral deposits valued at more than one trillion dollars (USD).¹⁰ "The potential for deep-sea mining in the Arctic to extract valuable metals," the "opening of new shipping lanes...will lead to increased circumpolar traffic, and fishing in the polar region has increased as the seas surrounding the North Pole become more navigable."¹¹ Climate change in the High North has the ability to impact the entire globalized community. Arctic sea lines of communication, to access East Asia from Europe and Russia, drastically cut transportation distances, significantly reducing transit times and costs.¹² The ability to gain access to this potentially new global common has also sparked the interest of peripheral European states, out-of-area states, as well as non-state actors. The emergent resource competition and race to capitalize on this economic opportunity presents security issues in the environmental, energy, and maritime arenas.

Russian Claims to the Arctic

The country with the most prevailing territorial rights is the Russian Federation, holding nearly 80 percent of Arctic territory.¹³ The country is reliant on the region to source 93 percent of its natural gas and 75 percent of its oil.¹⁴ With a vested economic interest in the region, Russia has developed clear policies, backed by military strategies, to ensure the protection of their economic interests. The dominant Russian presence in the region presents a challenge to the Western world and especially NATO, as five of the seven remaining Arctic states are members of the alliance.¹⁵ Even though the relationship between NATO and Russia is

historically one of opposition, “there is reason to believe that the Arctic will remain an area of peace and cooperation” as demonstrated by the success of the Arctic Council.¹⁶ These countries have been working to resolve disputes through bilateral diplomacy and multilateral efforts.

The “shared interests of sustainable economic development, scientific research, and emergency response may push collaboration over competition.”¹⁷ According to NATO, most of its “members and partners rely on energy security supplies from abroad, sent through pipelines and cables that cross many borders.”¹⁸ With the Arctic becoming a “freely accessible extension of the global commons” the ability for the nations to gain access to previously unreachable energy reserves in the Arctic would alleviate both availability and accessibility challenges. Energy security would become more viable to NATO countries. This would have a substantial economic impact on Russia because resources from the Arctic, which account for 11 percent of Russia’s gross national product, are used as diplomatic, economic, and foreign policy instruments when dealing with NATO countries.^{19, 20} Maintaining stability and ensuring maritime security in the region is of economic and political significance to all arctic nations, but particularly to Russia given their dominant presence.

Territorial Disputes

The current relationship among Arctic states regarding dispute resolution in the region is one of collective cooperation. To date, sovereign nations have been highly successful at achieving resolution through diplomatic means. “It is estimated that up to 95 percent of Arctic resources fall within sovereign borders, thus limiting the opportunity for overlapping claims.” Most unresolved disputes have been quelled through diplomacy preventing the need for economic or military escalation. In 1985, the United States infringed upon what Canada claimed as their sovereign territory when an American ship traversed through the Northwest Passage.

The United States, perceiving this to be an international waterway, did not seek or gain Canadian approval to transit the area. Canada claims that these waterways, to include the land, sea, and air surrounding them, join their sovereign territories and are “indivisible.”²¹ Canada assessed this action as a violation of their jurisdiction, however the United States did not concede to this assessment. This bilateral Arctic disagreement, albeit between two North American allied nations, has not escalated or significantly impacted diplomatic relations. Yet this is indicative of the fact that “every single bilateral relationship where Arctic countries share a physical border, except one...has at least one significant point of disagreement,” potentially destabilizing collective cooperation among these states.²² Although the United States was found to be at fault by Canada, the issue regarding the delineation between sovereign and international waters has yet to be fully resolved and will become more ambiguous due the unique dynamic effects of climate change.

The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea defined sovereign claims to territorial waters. Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) provide states exclusive rights to the economic resources in the waters and sea bed extending 200 nautical miles from the natural shorelines of each country.²³ This can be extended to 350 nautical miles if there is evidence to support the existence of an extended continental shelf. This has spurred deep-sea exploration and mapping by Arctic countries to support extension of their claims. Russia has applied this as their reasoning to establishing ownership claims of the Lomonosov Ridge and the North Pole.²⁴ In 2007 they placed a Russian flag on the ocean floor below the pole.²⁵ These acts instigated ongoing controversy between Canada and Denmark who also have competing claims. This argument is complicated by the United States who refuses to acknowledge any nation’s claim of ownership to the Lomonosov Ridge citing that it is “not an extension of any State’s continental

shelf and should therefore be regarded as international waters.²⁶ In addition to extending claims into the ocean, Arctic countries are also faced with further effects of climate change unique to the region, such as melting ice resulting in higher sea levels which will continue to push shorelines inland, thus moving the associated EEZ inland as well.²⁷ Although tensions regarding sovereignty and territorial disputes remain benign, climate change continues to ignite new competition and evolving security threats affecting regional stability.

Arctic Militarization

To ensure the security of the Northern Passage and protect their energy resources, Russia has developed a defensive military strategy. This includes the renewed use of bases positioned in the Arctic region which have not been utilized since the Cold War.²⁸ With this comes the strategic repositioning of aircraft, naval fleets, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and other surface-to-air weapon system. Russia claims this demonstration of power is not meant to concern Arctic neighbors but to deter the actions of out-of-area actors, such as China, from pursuing energy and economic interests in the High North.²⁹ Russian remilitarization of the region reflects their Arctic strategy which they claim focuses on “long-term defense rather than short term aggression.”³⁰ Regardless, Russia is justified in their pursuit of defending the Arctic as “one third of the country lies within the Arctic Circle.”³¹ Further, they have the greatest capacity and capability of any Arctic country to pursue this defense.

Whatever their intent, Russian military actions are not necessarily perceived by other Arctic states as benign. Admiral William Gortney, Commander of United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) stated, “Russian assertiveness” is of great concern to the security of not only the United States, but Canada as well who falls under the bi-national umbrella of command through NORAD.

According to his NORTHCOM posture statement in 2015, the Department of Defense is focused on a strategy for a “peaceful, stable, and conflict free Arctic.”³² Although other Arctic states are committed to a similar approach it is difficult for the United States to ignore the “notable increase in Russian military assertiveness on the world stage, including the approaches to the homelands.”³³ The shortest distance from Russia to the United States and Canada is over the Arctic. Although the Cold War has ended, it is not forgotten and Russia repositioning their ICBMs with the range to reach the United States and Canada, can easily be interpreted as a threat to North American security. To those countries with the closest proximity to Russia, the perception of increased military activity in the High North is only thinly veiled. Russian “defensive” actions are causing deep concern for not only North America, but European states as well.³⁴

While the United States and Canada have air and naval assets in the Arctic, the only NATO member within the Arctic Council with a “permanent military presence in the polar region” is Norway.³⁵ Although Sweden and Finland are not NATO members they are part of a developing special security zone comprised of other Scandinavian countries who are NATO members. This “mini-NATO” alliance shares a concern with escalating Russian military defenses in the Arctic and collectively seek to “modernize and expand its forces to counter” the build-up.^{36, 37} With Russian military exercises culminating in the simulated takeover of Swedish territories it becomes understandable why non-NATO neighbors would be compelled to be prepared for their own military defense and pursue multilateral partnerships with the alliance.³⁸ Further, Sweden and Finland have also expressed continued interest in pursuing full membership in the NATO alliance. Although they are also being courted by Russia to pursue an eastern alliance, the military build-up in addition to the aggression demonstrated toward their Baltic

neighbors has caused great concern for these countries.³⁹ Regardless of whether their intention is peaceful or hostile, Russia has a clear military strategy for the Arctic.

Arctic Multilateral Relations

Since the establishment of the Arctic Council, affairs and disputes among member states have been solved peacefully. However, there are still existing bilateral and multilateral disputes regarding territorial sovereignty and access to international passages that have yet to be resolved. Furthermore, as technology develops and polar ice continues to melt, two issues will perpetuate these disputes. The first is in regard to continental shelves, introducing or extending claims of borders. This will become increasingly important as every inch gained will be countered by the second issue of rising water levels which will cause boundaries to recede inland. The dynamic volatility of climate change to borders and territorial claims promotes instability between these states as they race to maintain or gain control of the resource rich environment. The economic and strategic value of the region will only become more contentious as global resource competition furthers.

To protect their interests, Arctic states have pursued multilateral relationships across the DIME (diplomacy, information, military, and economic) spectrum. With regard to military pursuits in the Arctic, Russia has been the most active causing concern among the other Arctic states. Although Russia has demonstrated amicable behavior by utilizing diplomacy to resolve disputes within Arctic Council, demonstrated aggression in other parts of the world still cause concern to the West. Therefore it is in the best interest of these nations to likewise develop their military capabilities for defense of the Arctic. “During the Cold War, much thought went into building military capabilities that would be beneficial for defense without being provocative.”⁴⁰ This strategy should be carried through to mitigate future risks. No other alliance or multilateral

relationship has the capacity or ability to develop a military strategy in response to Russia's established strategy, except for NATO. "The Arctic Council's mandate, as articulated in the Ottawa Declaration, explicitly excludes military security."⁴¹ Therefore, as the military force supporting diplomatic strategies for the Western world, NATO must play an active role in the development of an Arctic strategy to ensure the security and stability of the region. As addressed in the North Atlantic Treaty, the alliance must ensure collective defense for the preservation of peace among the territories belonging to the parties of the treaty.

The idea of building military capabilities while maintaining peaceful relations with Russia stems from a historic NATO approach to defense and détente introduced by the Harmel Report in 1967.⁴² This document articulates NATO's role as an alliance, advocating for a two-pronged approach with regard to East-West relations: multilateral efforts through diplomacy to reach peaceful relations and collective defense ensuring military parity to prevent an unfavorable balance of power.⁴³ As the North Atlantic Treaty states in Article 5, NATO allies must be prepared to provide collective self-defense in the event of an armed attack and utilize armed forces "to restore and maintain security in the North Atlantic area."⁴⁴ Yet this does not abdicate NATO countries from maintaining their capability to ensure individual self-defense. Therefore Arctic countries, although not expecting to engage in military conflict, must retain the ability to do so. However, the alliance must strive to settle international disputes "through peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered" as proposed in Article 1.⁴⁵ Article 2 maintains that peaceful international relations will be strengthened through free institutions to promote conditions of stability.⁴⁶ In order to maintain a balance of regional power in response to the actions of Russia and to ensure stability for the region, NATO must take a more active role to ensure peaceful diplomatic relations can be

maintained while safeguarding security of the North Atlantic. This can be accomplished by supporting peaceful resolution through the Arctic Council and other multilateral relations.

Conclusion

The effects of climate change continue to influence the dynamics in the Arctic region. Advances in technology will perpetuate territorial claims to sovereignty while rising water levels transform coastal boundaries. Although under the current status quo Arctic states are able to resolve disputes peacefully, these changes will perpetuate instability as the resolution to previously resolved disputes are challenged, resource competition becomes more aggressive, and the strategic significance of the Arctic gains traction. Further, as Russia escalates their military presence and as the interest of foreign actors increases, further regional security concerns will arise. The ability of Arctic states to deter aggression and protect their interests through peaceful means requires the military backing provided by NATO. Therefore, in order to ensure stability in the region, NATO must pursue a détente and defense strategy utilizing diplomatic approaches backed with military strength to deter Russian Arctic hegemony and ensure enduring security.

End Notes

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